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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8527
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RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHZA/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI IMMEDIATE 7108

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, EEB/TPP
STATE PASS TO USTR FOR BWEISEL, DBISBEE, BKLEIN
COMMERCE FOR EAP/MAC/OKSA FOR JKELLY
USDA FOR FAS/OCRA/PETLOCK AND USDA FOR FAS/OSTA/BEAN

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH AGRICULTURE MINISTER

¶1. (U) Summary: The Ambassador called on Theera Wongsamut, the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives, on October 2 to describe the objectives of a forthcoming seminar focusing on biotechnology and risk communications. The Ambassador also encouraged the Ministry's Department of Livestock Development (DLD) to improve communications with international trading partners via WTO mechanisms and suggested renewed engagement on a number of long-standing U.S. proposals in the animal health area, including pork. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador John, accompanied by FAS and APHIS staff, called on Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives Theera Wongsamut on October 2 to provide details about a October 5-6 seminar focused on risk communications and biotechnology. The seminar was organized by USDA and the State Department in cooperation with the Thai Food Science and Technology Association and the National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC). The Ambassador explained that the seminar would promote APEC goals related to agricultural biotechnology and developing tools to assist APEC economy government officials in creating, implementing, and communicating science-based policies. (Note: The Ambassador delivered welcoming remarks as part of the public portion of the event on October 5. End Note.)

¶3. (U) The Minister spoke about Thailand's ongoing inability to commercialize agricultural biotechnology. He noted Thailand's regulatory system presently only provided for field testing and reiterated concerns that Thailand's international customers were opposed to Thai products employing the technology. The Minister recognized that improved risk communications were useful and expressed appreciation for the efforts being made in this area.

¶4. (U) Minister Theera expressed gratitude about continued movements under the APHIS preclearance program for Thai fruit exports to the US. Approved fruits include, litchi, longan, mango, mangosteen, pineapple, and rambutan. Thailand has a pending request to export dragonfruit, pumpkin, cassava, and guava and is expected to provide the information necessary to permit review of this request to APHIS soon.

¶5. (SBU) While highlighting the Ministry's DLD as an effective partner with USDA/APHIS on highly pathogenic avian influenza (and other animal diseases) in Thailand and neighboring countries, the Ambassador raised concern about technical cooperation on bilateral issues. The Ambassador urged DLD to notify significant changes in its regulations (for example, product suspension) via established WTO processes. He also explained that USDA also had a number of pending proposals to update existing animal product protocols to ensure WTO consistency, but that there had been minimal official feedback from DLD. As an example, the Ambassador pointed out that recent DLD pork restrictions due to H1N1 were directly contrary to the guidance of the international standards setting organizations,

and urged renewed and productive engagement.

¶6. (SBU) Minister Theera outlined recent Thai government attempts to engage USDA on accreditation of Thai certification bodies and issues of equivalence for Thai organic programs. He stated the Ministry understood the mechanisms under USDA authorities but had not yet found a way forward to obtain access for its organic products.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The discussion was a friendly review of a number of the bilateral agricultural concerns, with both sides expressing appreciation for the existing strong trading relationship and agreeing to engage productively on the problem areas. USDA is engaging the new Director General of DLD on its outstanding requests as part of its follow-up to the concerns raised. End Comment.

¶8. (SBU) Bio Notes: Theera Wongsamut became the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives in late 2008, after a 30-plus year career as an irrigation engineer in the Ministry's Royal Irrigation Department (RID). Before being appointed Minister, Theera served as the Director General of RID, the Inspector General of the Ministry, and a Deputy Permanent Secretary. Minister Theera has a close relationship with Banharn Silpa-acha, the former Chart Thai Pattana Party Leader -- a friendship that led to his appointment as Agriculture Minister in the Abhisit coalition. Theera is the least wealthy of Abhisit's cabinet members, declaring assets of 5.5 million baht (approximately \$160,000) in the mandatory anti-corruption reporting requirements. Theera was born on December 15, 1948, in Nakhon Sri Thammarat, and completed his education in engineering at Kasetsart University.

JOHN